

# The arrival of Jihadism in Latin America - Part I The curious case of Mexico's Mayan Radical Muslims

Emanuel Pietrobon



Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyses  
Piazza dei Navigatori 22, 00147 – Rome (Italy)  
Analytical Dossier – N. 15/2020 – July 2020

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First Edition: July 2020

Analytical Dossier – N. 15/2020

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**THE ARRIVAL OF JIHADISM IN LATIN AMERICA – PART I  
THE CURIOUS CASE OF MEXICO'S MAYAN RADICAL MUSLIMS**

A research project by Emanuel Pietrobon for the University of Turin

## PROJECT SUMMARY

*In Mexico there is a small but striving Muslim community which is based San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the third-largest city of the rebel state of Chiapas (known to be home of a 26-year-long still unsolved insurgency), and which has been attracting worldwide attention since its establishment.*

*The first Muslims arrived in 1994 shortly afterwards the appearance of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) and, indeed, they succeeding in exploiting the rebellion to make proselytism among the locals, in particular in the Mayan community.*

*From that year on, Chiapas' Muslim community has been targeted by the attention of American and Mexican secret services due to the alleged links with terrorism, and the surrounding hostility-shaped environment has been prompting the faithfuls to isolate themselves from the outerworld.*

*Due to the scarcity of field investigations, we propose a ground-breaking participatory research-based project to be carried out in Chiapas with the goals of making an accurate census, giving voice to ordinary Mayan Muslims, enabling them to share their views, opinions and concerns, and reaching out each part involved in the issue, like Muslim preachers, islamic organizations, Mexico City's authorities and the non-Muslim inhabitants of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.*

## STATE OF THE ART

The Mexican academic community didn't dedicate much attention to the topic of Islam and radicalization in Chiapas and accordingly most of the works which have been produced over time are the result of North American and European research.

The sources I've used to outline the issue are reported narrowly in the dedicated section and here I introduce the ones I've found more considerably helpful to my ends: *a)* in-depth report on the arrival of islam in Chiapas by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *b)* paper on islam and religious radicalization in Latin America by Evan Ellis, professor at the U.S. Army War College – Strategic Studies Institute, *c)* article on islam in Chiapas and its sponsors written by Natascha Garvin for the scientific journal ISIM Review, *d)* article on Islamist terrosim and radicalization in Mexico written by Middle East specialist Chris Zambelis for the renowned American think tank The Jamestown Foundation, *e)* photo-reportage by National Geographic.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of islam in Chiapas begins in 1994 with the arrival of Spanish missionary Aureliano Perez Yruela, also known by his Muslim name Mohammad Nafia. The missionary, who self-proclaimed himself “Emir”, was sent by a Spain-based Sufi organisation known as the Murabitun World Movement (MWM) as part of a global effort to reach out insurgency-plagued regions where to attract proselytes. More or less in the same period, other missions were sent to Chechnya and to East Germany (Garvin, 2005; Zambelis, 2006; ).

The MWM has been established during the 1970s by Ian Dallas, also known by his Muslim name Sheikh Abdel Qader as-Sufi al-Murabit, and is believed to be a dangerous entity due to the radical values preached by his members and, of course, by the founder himself. Indeed, Dallas is known for the anti-Western, anti-capitalist and anti-semitic rhetoric that characterize most of his sermons, and he has been denounced by some former leading members for extremism and corruption.

The MWM is believed to be funded by private businesspeople from Malaysia and Gulf monarchies but the level of secrecy and the scarcity of official investigations hinder any effort to know more about it (Garvin, 2005).

Returning to Perez, he is believed to have been jailed in Spain and in the US for Islamist activities, and upon his arrival he allegedly offered weapons to the EZLN in exchange for their conversion to Islam. His offer was refused but he was allowed to settle in San Cristobal de las Casas and make proselytes (Garvin, 2005; Castle, 2015).

His authoritarian leadership has been source of clashes which eventually led to an internal split in early 2000s. Tens of families left the MWM-run commune due to alleged mistreatment and forced self-isolation and resorted to the authorities, asking for Lopez's expulsion from Chiapas, but their request was rejected due to the fear riots and further violence in the state. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002; Valvo, 2016)

From early 2000s to date, nothing changed in Perez-run commune established at the outskirts of San Cristobal de las Casas: children aren't allowed to attend public schools, Muslims can't have any contacts with non-Muslims, women wear the most austere islamic clothing, members are even forbidden from having business contacts with the non-Muslims and are trained to subsistence agriculture, cooking and textile arts so that to satisfy their needs by themselves. Furthermore, cases of polygamy have been reported. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002; Garvin, 2005; Valvo, 2016)

Since Chiapas is a state within the state and Perez's Muslim commune is a state within Chiapas, it has been proven very hard to carry out research activities and check the living conditions of the members. Non-Muslims, journalists and researchers are seen with suspicion and are forbidden from entering the commune and speaking with the members, whereas Perez rarely grants interviews. Everything we know about mistreatments, violences and radical preachings is from former members which got to escape and chose to re-settle elsewhere. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002; Garvin, 2005).

## THE REASONS BEHIND CONVERSIONS

There are no reliable data about Mexico's Muslim population and accordingly not even about Chiapas' Mayan Muslims. However, several estimates agree that San Cristobal de las Casas-based Muslims are between 400 and 700, whereas the overall state-extended community might be formed by up to 2,000 – 5,500 (Strochlic, 2017; Daily Sabah, 2018; Al día social, 2018; Yeni Şafak, 2019).

According to Mexican anthropologist Gaspar Marquecho, Mayans tend to leave Catholicism in favour of Evangelicalism and Islam because the modern-day mainstream thought, widely popularized by the aforementioned, associates it to national traumas such as colonial rule, imperialism, authoritarianism, and the extermination of Indian populations by Spanish *conquistadores* (Zambelis, 2006; Saliba 2012).

Complementarily to this vision, others argue that the endless centuries-old discrimination and hidden segregation faced by the Mayan tribes, Tzotzils in particular, is the main driving factor behind the success experienced by Evangelical and Muslims missionaries in converting them (Zambelis, 2006).

The MWM got to create a parallel welfare system in Chiapas, providing aid and community-level forms of social safety nets, against the background of training courses for the faithfuls to subsistence agriculture and textile arts. In short, the MWM got to make Mayans self-reliant and to create an isolated but well-functioning society where discrimination doesn't exist anymore and poverty is cushioned. This is another possible reason behind the success to attract Mayans rather than Mexicans (Zambelis, 2006; Valvo, 2016).

Others point out to Chiapas' peculiar religious history, arguing that here people tend to change religion more often than in other Mexican states and this would be confirmed by the data available. Long before the arrival of Islam, Mayans were already converting to Evangelicalism, and other many other imported religions are present, from Buddhism to New Age cults. Curiously, most of the Mayans who convert to Islam are former Catholics-turned-Protestants. (Garvian, 2005; Castle, 2015).

Interestingly, the latest wave of new converts has involved many Mayan women, especially single mothers, and this is possibly due to the search of a new life away from some plagues which affect Mayan men, like machism, domestic violence, alcoholism. (San Antonio Current, 2002; Garvin, 2005).

## THE REASONS BEHIND RADICALIZATION

Islam was imported in Chiapas by the MWM, which is a controversial organisation known for the preaching of radical sermons and for his strong control over the faithfuls (exerted by psychological pressures, violence and threats), and this is the main explanatory reason behind the presence of religious radicalization among the converts, but other factors play a role (Garvin, 2005; Castle, 2015).

Today's Chiapas' Muslim population is much more diversified than in the past. Nafia's commune was affected by a split in early 2000s and since then other communities (Shiites, Wahhabis, etc) appeared and flourished with the help of foreign moneylenders based in Malaysia and Gulf monarchies (Garvin, 2005; Zambelis, 2006; Valvo, 2016).

More recently, even Turkey started showing an interest for this small-but-growing Muslim community and now the state-owned Turkish Cooperation and Coordination

Agency (TİKA) is present in Chiapas through several Mayans-targeting humanitarian missions consisting in regular food delivery, donations of machines and livestock, building of libraries. From 2016 to 2018, the TİKA spent \$2 million in development aid and launched 60 projects in Mexico, most of the funds and the projects are being carried out in Chiapas (Daily Sabah, 2018).

What is the linking point between Turkey and Gulf Monarchies? They both have a dubious fame and their presence helps spread their own peculiar versions of islam which aren't really moderate.

Mexico City-based Muslim Cultural Centre (Centro Cultural Islámico de México) is being denounced the spread of radicalism among Mayan Muslims in Chiapas since early 2000s and developed special programs to help former members re-start a life and discover a different version of islam (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. 2002).

In the end, American, Spanish and Mexican secret services never got to find sustainable evidence of possible links between the self-proclaimed Emir and terrorist organizations, despite the rumours surrounding the alleged presence of Al-Qaeda members in the region and the connection to Spanish Islamists spread out by some former members (Zambelis, 2006).

In any case, some events suggest that a more in-depth field investigation might turn these decades-old rumours into facts.

Infamous terrorists are believed to have spent some time in Chiapas for unknown reasons, like Mohamed Bakar, the brother of Moshen Rabbani. Rabbani is currently searched worldwide since he is believed to be mastermind of Buenos Aires terrorist attacks of 1992 and 1994 (Ellis, 2015).

Bakar and Rabbani are linked to Hezbollah, whose presence in Mexico dates back to the early 1990s and links between the organization and the domestic drug cartels have been proved by the several arrests occurred over the years. The alleged stay of Bakar in Chiapas might be the sign that the organization established links with the local Muslim community and since we're speaking of an entity involved in terrorist plots, its presence would strengthen the already-existing radicalist trends (Beck, 2012).

In April 2001, the police arrested Bassam Al Taher and his wife in Tonalá (Chiapas), where they were living illegally for about six years. Al Taher was sought by the German and Austrian police for his participation in dozens of terrorist acts committed on the behalf of Palestine-linked terrorist organizations. Later the same year, in Palenque, the police discovered a human trafficking ring, arresting and deporting more than 80 undocumented people from Iraq and Yemen. (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002).

Lastly, in August 2019, Mexican authorities arrested in Huehuetán (Chiapas) an American citizen, Mohammed Azharuddin Chhipa, searched by both the FBI and the Interpol for terrorism-linked activities. He was immediately deported to the US. No one knew of his stay in Chiapas and his arrest occurred by chance (France24, 2019).

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